

Why Capable Leaders Lose Authority Under Pressure

An Executive Observation Paper

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Authority Leaks

Introduction

This paper did not begin as a theory.

It began with observations gathered over several years through executive diagnostics, leadership conversations, and advisory work with capable professionals, long before the practice had its current name.

The circumstances changed.

The people changed.

The organisations changed.

The movement did not.

Leaders who were demonstrably capable under normal conditions consistently lost access to that capability at particular moments of pressure.

At first these moments looked like communication problems. Confidence problems. Executive presence.

They weren't.

Introduction continued

This paper documents those observations, what they mean for organisations, and the reasoning behind the Authority Leak Diagnostic. It is not a new leadership model. It is a pattern that existing approaches may not yet have been built to see.

What follows: what was observed, why it stays hidden, where the cost surfaces instead, and why a different kind of diagnosis is needed.

Basis of Observation

This paper draws on ten formally logged Authority Leak Diagnostics, several earlier diagnostic conversations conducted before formal recording began, and sustained advisory work across different professional contexts. All examples are anonymised.

The Observation

One movement kept appearing before behaviour changed. Before communication deteriorated. Before confidence dropped. Before decisions got compromised.

Attention had already moved, away from the leader's own position, toward something that had become attached to the moment.

By an authority leak, I mean exactly that: the moment attention leaves your spine, and you adjust before anyone's asked you to. Automatic. Before there's a moment to catch it and choose.

The attached thing was different every time. A board member. A difficult conversation. A reputation. A hierarchy. A client. Being liked. Keeping the peace. Protecting credibility. The movement underneath it never changed. Attention left position before conscious choice, and behaviour followed.

By position, I mean the place inside the leader from which they know what they know, see what they see, and stand behind it. By the attached thing, I mean whatever attention starts protecting, securing, or managing, at the expense of holding position.

Take one moment, held still.

A leader steps in front of a room she reads as more senior than her. She takes a breath, and goes blank. Not nerves. Blank.

She loses the thread of a presentation she knows cold. In the diagnostic, she named it herself, almost before being asked: she couldn't give herself permission to pause, because the room outranked her.

The moment her attention left her spine, it went entirely onto how she was landing, not the content, not herself.

What the room saw wasn't a capability gap. It was a leader managing perception instead of delivering what she'd already mastered. Her own read of the moment agreed with the room's.

What We Repeatedly Observed

The attached thing changes.

The movement doesn't.

Leaders rarely notice the moment authority first starts to leave them. By the time they know something's wrong, behaviour has already adapted.

The body gets there first. Tightening. Heat. Fluttering. Blankness. A punch in the chest. Numbness. Every observation logged shows the same order: the physiological cue arrives, and conscious awareness catches up after.

Compensation gets mistaken for capability constantly. Over-explaining looks like thoroughness. Sharpness looks like authority. Numbing looks like composure.

Whatever the leak produces on the surface tends to resemble the opposite of what's actually happening underneath it.

What We Repeatedly Observed

The consequences show up before anyone names the cause. A meeting drifts. A decision softens. Delegation quietly fails. A commercial opportunity narrows without anyone deciding to narrow it. A relationship shifts and nobody can point to when.

At its most severe, the same mechanism produces attrition nobody correctly attributes: a capable person leaving a role, or leaving a leader, for reasons neither of them can fully name.

| The visible problem is almost never the real one.

Why This Matters to Organisations

Pressure does not remove capability.

Pressure removes access to capability.

That distinction is the whole argument.

Organisations invest heavily in recruiting, developing, and promoting capable leaders. Under pressure, many of those same leaders temporarily lose access to the exact capability the organisation already paid for.

It rarely looks like a dramatic failure. It looks like a conversation that never quite happens. A decision that takes longer than it should. Authority that feels inconsistent from one room to the next. Leadership capability that plateaus for no visible reason.

The organisation hasn't necessarily developed the wrong leaders. It has lost access to capability those leaders already possess.

This work restores that access. Existing leadership development isn't wrong about what it teaches. It begins after behaviour forms. This begins before behaviour forms.

A different layer. Not a replacement.

Why This Often Remains Hidden

Here's the obvious objection: if leaders keep succeeding despite an authority leak, why treat it as a problem?

Because of what "succeeding" is measured against.

Success gets judged by the outcome achieved with the leak in place, never against what the same leader would have produced with full access to their own judgement, wisdom, and choice.

A decision that took three extra meetings looks like process, not cost, because nobody saw the version that took one. A promotion that landed later than it should have looks like a career, not a delay, because there's no visible timeline to hold it against.

Success absorbs the discount. Nothing failed, so nothing gets named.

That's what makes the leak durable rather than dramatic. It doesn't cost the leader their job. It costs them a fraction of what they were capable of producing, every time pressure lands, indefinitely, and because the fraction still looks like competent output, nobody goes looking for the difference.

Why This Often Remains Hidden

There's a second reason it stays hidden, and this one sits with the leader, not the observer.

Someone still delivering has no reason to name the struggle. Saying "I'm finding this harder than it looks" while the results are still landing reads as manufacturing a problem, not reporting one.

There's nothing to point to yet. Just a private sense that something costs more than it should. So it goes unnamed, by the one person best placed to name it, for as long as the results hold.

For the individual, that discount is livable. A slightly slower decision. A slightly harder conversation. A slightly smaller room walked into. Across one career, in isolation, it rarely forces the question.

Why This Often Remains Hidden

For the organisation, the same discount doesn't isolate.

It compounds, across every leader carrying it, in every high-pressure moment, for as long as it stays unnamed. That's the distinction that matters commercially. The individual has no comparison point, so urgency stays low.

The organisation is paying full price for leadership capability and getting a discounted version of it, on every leader who leaks, with no way to see the gap.

Where the Cost Can Show Up Instead

When the mechanism goes unnamed, its consequences get filed under something else.

What breaks the silence is rarely a conversation.
It's an exit.

Burnout gets filed under workload.

A capable leader leaves for a role with the same pressure but a lower personal cost of holding position, and calls it a better opportunity, because that's the only language available to her.

Most quietly of all: a talented team member leaves a leader carrying an unnamed leak, unable to say precisely why the relationship never felt as solid as it should have. Only that it didn't.

Where the Cost Can Show Up Instead

None of it gets diagnosed as an authority leak. It gets diagnosed as attrition. Culture fit. Burnout. Bad luck with hiring.

The organisation ends up solving the exit instead of the mechanism that produced it, treating the same symptom, on repeat, in a different leader, in a different team, under a different name each time.

The case that follows shows what happens when the mechanism gets named before its cost gets written off as something else.

Cross-Sector Evidence

One of the earliest sustained examples of this mechanism came from a business owner, not an organisational leader.

She came in unable to translate what she knew into something people valued, not a communication skills gap, a positioning one. Before anyone questioned her, interrupted her, or disagreed with her, her attention had already shifted away from her own position toward how she might be received. She softened, diluted, or abandoned her own position before the room ever required it.

The intervention didn't touch communication, presentation skills, or confidence. It found the point where her attention left her own position under pressure, and repeatedly brought it back. Over time, holding position took less effort. Then no conscious effort at all. Not a new skill taught. Access to a capability that was already there, and going quietly unavailable.

Cross-Sector Evidence

The engagement ran nine months. She described greater clarity of thought, stronger self-trust, a marked drop in second-guessing. Externally, her contributions started pulling substantially more engagement than before, with no deliberate change in how she communicated. She wrote:

"I realise the magnitude of change it has made within me leading to how powerfully I show up in the world."

Since then, the same movement has shown up repeatedly in senior leaders, across different sectors. The room changes. The role changes. The attached thing changes. The mechanism doesn't.

This case predates the language of authority leaks, stance, orientation, and the attached thing. The intervention worked before those concepts had names.

The Implication

If authority consistently goes offline before conscious awareness, self-reflection alone can't reliably catch the moment it happens. Not because leaders lack insight. Because the movement happens before insight is available to have.

That's been observed often enough to warrant a different kind of intervention: one that slows a real moment down until the movement itself becomes visible.

The Authority Leak Diagnostic

The diagnostic exists to make that invisible movement visible. It isn't personality assessment. It isn't a coaching conversation.

Working through one real moment, it identifies exactly how authority leaves position in that leader's system, before behaviour forms, before the consequences show up somewhere else.

Only once the movement can be seen can it be deliberately interrupted.

Closing Observation

This paper isn't an argument against coaching, resilience work, or leadership development. Each has something real to offer. What these observations point to is a layer underneath all of them: the layer where authority first goes unavailable.

As this observation gets tested across more organisations, the question stops being whether leadership development works.

It becomes whether organisations can increase the return on the leadership capability they've already paid for, by restoring access to it the moment it first goes offline.

About Oge Okosieme

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Oge Okosieme works with capable leaders at the point where pressure begins to interfere with access to their own judgement, wisdom and choice.

Her work grew from years of observing the same movement across leadership conversations, executive diagnostics and advisory work: attention leaving position before behaviour changed.

Today, her practice focuses on making that movement visible, so leaders and organisations can restore access to capability that is already there.



The moment between pressure landing and what happens next.

That's the moment I work in.

Continue the Conversation

If this is a pattern you recognise, in yourself or in your organisation, let's talk.

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This paper is one in a series of live-field observations. Each one explores what leaders gain back when they keep access to their own judgement, wisdom and choice, and choose from it, even under pressure.

For organisations, that means fuller access to the capability, judgement and leadership they have already invested in.

WHAT THIS IS

A field-based observation.
Not a diagnosis. Not a framework.
A mirror to what's really going on.

WHO IT'S FOR

Leaders stepping into bigger roles, and
organisations developing them,
who want authority that stays
anchored.

WHAT YOU'LL GET

Clarity on the patterns behind
authority leaks, and the first
shifts that begin to close them.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Each observation builds the field.
This is the beginning of a deeper
unravelling.

NOTE

A field-based observation.
Test it against your own moments.
Pass it on if it names something true.